

Behind the rise of the National Front

24 June, 2014

What do we know about the voting base of the National Front (sociologically, demographically, etc.) and how has it changed since 1983?

To answer your question I will be obliged to use statistics based on “social professional categories” which is not ideal to understand any social reality. This said, if you compare the results of the European elections in 1984 to the same elections in 2014, the National Front (National Front) jumped from 17 to 28% of the votes of company owners; from 14 to 15% of higher professionals, managers and qualified experts; from 14 to 22% of second-rank professionals; from 15 to 35% of white-collar and service workers and from 8 to 45 % of blue-collar workers. So, the capital change is clearly the growing electoral influence of the National Front among the working class.

As regards the difference between men and women voters, what was true thirty years ago is no more valid today. Today women do not hesitate to vote as often as men for the National Front. What has not changed is that the more educated voters are, the less they vote for the National Front.

According to social scientists like Nonna Mayer and Florent Gougou¹, the National Front socio-electoral basis has been enriched, after 1995, by the growing vote of young workers, whose parents are also workers, or young people who are married to a working class man or woman. This generation has not known the long domination of the Right (1958-1981). It has known the Communist Party and Socialist Party in power and the catastrophic balance of French Left governments (1981-1986 and 1988-1993) unable to do anything against the dramatic rise of the unemployment (from 1.6 million in 1981 to 3.2 million employed in 1993, from 6.3 to 10 % of the active population), continuing destruction of whole industrial branches (coal, steel, shipyards, textile, etc.). On the opposite, during this period and until now, the Socialist Party defended the necessity of having a competitive economy based on good capitalist investors; it hailed the virtues of creating one’s own business and even glorified individual capitalist “success stories” like the crook Bernard Tapie.

According to sociologists, young workers who vote for the National Front explicitly hate the word “solidarity.” They think the state only cares about foreigners, undocumented migrants and “lazy” French people supposedly living on social benefits paid by “their” taxes. They dislike trade unions and grass roots associations, etc. More recently it seems the National Front has gained more influence not in the poorest suburbs (of the former Parisian suburban “Red Belt,” dominated by the Communist Party from the 1930s to the 1980s²) but in towns where very few or no foreign workers live, but where the fear of losing’s one job, of living in an insecure environment is constantly growing. That’s at least what has been noted by the social scientists after the last municipal and European elections of 2014. Apparently it’s not the poorest Franco-French workers, unemployed or not, who vote most for the National Front but those who have a job, a small technical diploma (like the CAP – two years – or the “baccalauréat professionnel” – three years –) obtained in a vocational school, live far away from the poorest suburbs but fear to lose their social status.

When one talks about the “workers” vote, one should always keep in mind the percentage of working class voters is smaller than the percentage of workers in the overall population, because (legal or “illegal”) foreign blue-collar workers constitute a very important part of the manual working class in France (around 50% of the 6 million blue-collar workers) and they have no right to vote. That leaves open the question of how would migrants vote, had they the possibility of doing so. I tend to think they would not vote exactly like Franco-French workers, unless the National Front really changes its program...

2. Some say that the National Front’s score on 25 May was not very significant, since it was lower than in the last presidential elections (abstentions were very high). Others say it’s significant (people

¹ Watch for example this video <http://www.world-for-fun.ls.fr/video/dailymotion/xllfoqe> http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xllfoqe_le-fn-parti-des-ouvriers-rencontre-de-l-observatoire-des-radicalites-politiques_news

² In 1977, the Communist Party controlled 54 municipalities around Paris and one third of the population of the suburbs around Paris. In France, it managed 1,500 communes, instead of 750 today, with only 2 towns of more than 100,000 inhabitants.

**still abstained when the polls said that the National Front might come out with the highest vote).
What do you think?**

Apart from the years 1945-1947, during which around 55 % of blue-collar workers voted for the Communist Party and around 20% for the SFIO (ancestor of the present Socialist Party), the percentage of blue-collar workers voting for the Communist and Socialist parties has regularly declined. In 1962, the reformist Left parties (Communist Party, Socialist Party, Parti Socialiste unifié) had only 40% of the workers' votes. 45 % of the workers voted De Gaulle in 1969, 30 % for Chirac in 1988 (this year Mitterrand got 70% of blue-collar votes), 47 % voted for Chirac in 2002 and 50 % for Sarkozy in 2007.

What is significant today is the demoralisation of the Socialist and Communist Parties old traditional working class voters who prefer staying home than voting, even for the Trotskyist Far Left or the new Parti de Gauche (a small social-chauvinist party coming from a split inside social-democracy in 2009). This abstention, which affects all social groups more or less in the same proportion, contrasts strongly with the mobilisation of National Front voters who support their party's line – even, for example, when the National Front calls to vote for a Socialist Party mayor or MP to impede the election of a UMP (Right) candidate who denounced them or refused an alliance.

But for the moment, most of the sceptical former Left voters do not vote for the National Front, especially those who still support the trade unions, are sometimes active in local Left associations or at least support their workmates, belong to the reformist Left periphery, etc.

So, contrary to a legend, there has been no massive transfer of the old Left (or even Communist Party) electorate towards the National Front. At least not until now, on a national scale, even if there can be some local exceptions to the rule!

According to electoral specialists, since 1984, and even more 1988, what has taken place, inside working class votes for the Right, is a transfer to the Far Right. To give a schematic figure, before 1984 it was more or less 50/50 between the Right and the Far Right working class vote, now it's more 25/75 in favour of the National Front. There is a growing sympathy for the National Front among young blue-collar or white-collar voters who had never voted before, have no links with the traditional reformist parties, trade unions, associations, etc.

The other long-term phenomenon is the decline of the workers vote in general for the Reformist Left. The Left vote including the Communist Party vote has always been inter-classist, contrary to the legend of its purely working class nature, but this process of class dilution is taking more importance: if the working class vote for the Communist and Socialist parties diminishes, the so-called “middle classes” (first and second rank professionals.) vote is more and more important for the reformist Left.

The decline of the workers vote for the Left corresponds to a transformation of French capitalism, the fact that 2 workers over 5 today work in an isolated position, do not belong to a numerically important workers collective. Let's recall in France, blue and white-collar workers represent 13 million people, 60% of the labour force.

The National Front is neither the “first French Party” nor the “first working class party” in France, as many journalists and Marine Le Pen have recently said. It does not control any trade union, or any fraction in any trade union, even if it has trade-unionists in its ranks. It does not organize a significant, militant, youth organisation. It does not play any role in the strikes or struggles for better living standards in working class suburbs. It's not able for the moment to control whole sections of the territory as French social-democracy and later Communist party did. So we should obviously be preoccupied by its growing electoral and ideological influence (for example, its electoral results encouraged the “Republican” Right to adopt its agenda on migration laws) but we should not panic or become paralyzed by the National Front.

3. The National Front has leading cadres with a clear fascist past, but avoids street-fighting and more recently has tried to get a “moderate” image. How would you define it as a party?

The National Front has never been a purely fascist party, with only fascist cadres and militants.

The Radical Left often presented in the past the National Front as a “prefascist” party and had more in less in mind the strategy of fighting the National Front in the streets as the Left sometimes fought the fascists in the 1930s and to get it banned by the state. This strategy has failed for many reasons which can't be dealt with here.

On the other part, the denunciation of the National Front as “non republican,” if not a fascist, Party was also propagated by mainstream media. It was (and is) part of the Socialist Party's strategy (*Le Monde* and *Libération* dailies have been very close to the Socialist Party for years and fully supported this dangerous policy): to exaggerate the importance and influence of the National Front, to present it as an imminent fascist threat for democracy, was (and is) conceived as a way:

– to divide the Right (the UMP party is a front regrouping several Right and Center organizations),

- to gather all the Left around a vague conception of antifascism and antiracism (therefore the creation of SOS Racisme in 1984 with the help of the Socialist Party),
- and more important to enable the Socialist Party to win the elections, given the very unfair electoral system in France (no proportional vote). But the advantage of this strategy for the Socialist Party has clearly come to an end.

So to come back to your question about the nature of the National Front, one has to trace its origins. The initial project was conceived by a core of mostly young fascists coming from Ordre Nouveau (New Order, a group banned in 1973 after one of its meetings was attacked by the – Trotskyist – Ligue Communiste). This project of a National Front, uniting the Radical Right and neo-fascist grouplets with the anti-Gaullist Right, was “kidnapped” by Jean-Marie Le Pen. He had much more contacts with official, bourgeois politicians than these inexperienced young guys and their older neo-fascist mentors. Le Pen also had good relations with ex-supporters of the Vichy regime (which collaborated with the Nazis) or men who fought on the Russian front in the Légion des Volontaires pour le Bolchevisme with the SS, and good friends among the anti-Gaullist militaries who participated to the OAS (Secret Military Organisation which tried to overthrow De Gaulle and stop Algeria’s independence negotiations). Le Pen succeeded to regroup in the same “Front” pagan neo-fascists, nationalist-revolutionaries (inspired by national-bolshevism, an other form of fascism), Catholic traditionalists, ideologues of the “Nouvelle Droite” (New Right)³, nostalgists of Vichy and French colonialism, and some traditional right-wing politicians. He was a good speaker (his charisma is appreciated by a large periphery... and even more by the media!). He was able to play the role of THE Leader in a dominating position over the different fractions and tendencies of the National Front fighting each other inside his party, while he nurtured and manipulated these rivalries to stay at the head of his organisation. But he has never been a serious organizer because he wanted to control too much every move and every decision of his cadres and to play his personal card.

The relation of the National Front with street violence has never been the same as the traditional fascists in the 1930s. The National Front did not try to organize its own militias (it preferred to infiltrate the police and armed forces, hopefully with little success until now – not like Golden Dawn in Greece) although it had a quite professional and impressive “service d’ordre” called DPS (Département Protection Sécurité) which also works as an intelligence agency (it supposedly regroups 1,500 members and has been connected to many violent incidents). It always maintained more or less hidden friendly relationships with smaller fascist groups (the advantage of these groups is that they can be banned on Sunday and recreated with an other name on Monday). The National Front has always conveniently used these groups to protect its meetings, put up its posters, and even to do the dirty job (fighting the Far Left in the Universities and sometimes in the street) without dirtying its own hands and tainting too much its reputation.

The recent supposedly more “moderate” image has been built up with the help of mainstream media which closed their eyes on many dark aspects of the National Front. They invited Marine Le Pen very often and tried to spread the message she wanted something really different from the neo-fascist National Front’s Old Guard.

The media and many social scientists think Marine Le Pen wants to break with the old project of uniting all neo-fascist or extreme right groups, and to build a presidential machine centered around her and closest collaborators. The diffusion of this new image has been facilitated, during the last ten years, by the fact the National Front’s doctrine is much less officially oriented towards 19th-century counter revolutionary theoreticians and 20th-century monarchists, fascists or neo-fascists. It attempts to present a governmental program which could be accepted by a good part of the “respectable Right”.

The 1999 split inside the National Front also affected, for various complex reasons, many elements close to the nationalist-revolutionaries, the New Right and the national-Catholics inside the leadership and among its militants. So either they left to form new parties (MNR, Parti de la France, etc.) or to come back to their original fascist grouplets, or they stayed but were marginalized, or opportunistically changed their line to a softer one....

There has been a lot of debates among historians about the labelling of the National Front: national-populist, neo-populist, populist, radical right, Far Right, nationalist authoritarian, etc. Mainstream social scientists have never characterized the National Front as a fascist party and I think they are right. But they are wrong on several important aspects:

- they slander or ridicule the anarchist or radical left antifascists as being as “totalitarian” as their enemies;
- they underestimate the unofficial links between the National Front and the more radical groups from which the National Front regularly co-opts militants and even leaders;

³ About the Nouvelle Droite’s impact of British Far Right, one can listen to Nigel Copsey’s conference in English <http://backdoorbroadcasting.net/2011/09/nigel-copsey-au-revoir-to-sacred-cows-the-nouvelle-droites-impact-on-britains-far-right/>

–they are too confident in the capacities of French (or European) democratic systems to pacify and swallow the National Front or other national-populist parties;

–they underestimate the influence of social media on the National Front militants (for example, the influence of people like Soral and Dieudonné who have an anti-Semitic agenda and nurture popular anti-Semitism with an anti-Zionist, anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist rhetoric).

To whitewash the National Front, Marine Le Pen copy-pasted what Bruno Mégret (the National Front number two at that time) tried in the 1990s: building the Front from below, by winning small town municipalities (from 10,000 to 100,000 inhabitants); gaining as many municipal councilors and mayors as possible, making local alliances with the Right (UMP) to break (or split) this mainstream Right party, trying to attract young people with a certain academic background and high-rank state officials, etc. This project failed with Mégret because Le Pen did not admit any intelligent rival with an alternative strategy. So he kicked Mégret out of the party in 1998 but Marine Le Pen rapidly retook exactly the same ideas some years later... with Daddy's help. This project also failed because (with the exception of one mayor in Orange who left the National Front while remaining on the same political line), the National Front has been unable to financially and politically manage the towns of Toulon (185,000 inhabitants), Vitrolles and Marignanne, gained in 1995 and 1997.

Marine Le Pen was also very much inspired by Fortuyn and Wilders' tactics in the Netherlands. The idea was to appear as the best defenders of Western freedoms and civilization (including, for Marine Le Pen, the French Enlightenment, French Revolution and French Republic which were always demonized by French traditional fascists). She did not go as far as her Dutch models who openly defend gay rights but she sold to the media and to the public a kind of cheap "feminism" (meaning women can divorce, work, raise their children alone, sometimes be obliged to abort without risking going to Hell) and a cheap form of "tolerance" towards homosexuality (several of her political counselors are gay and this situation creates problems in the National Front's Old Guard). It does not matter whether she is "sincere" or not: the media have presented her as an "independent" woman who had liberal ideas (liberal in the American sense of the word). The media just forgot to tell us she is now 46 years old and still lives with Daddy in a luxurious private mansion, and most of her party's money comes from her father's dubious heritage (Le Pen managed to convince the owner of a big building company – Ciments Lambert – to leave him his money when he died).

Marine Le Pen also borrowed from Dutch right-wing populists the idea of targeting Muslims, both as migrants and as practitioners of a non-Western religion. It was a good move for her because she could this way defend "laïcité" (French conception of secularism) which was always traditionally a Left, or at least a Republican, idea, attacked during a long period by the Right, the Catholic church, the monarchists and totally ignored by the traditional Far Right.

4. Compared to the fascist parties of the 1930s, the National Front seems to use relatively little social demagogy. Is that an accurate comment? If it is, why? What themes and ideas best serve the National Front to win support?

Well, the National Front has many common points with the old-style fascists: cult of a leader (Jean-Marie Le Pen and now Marine Le Pen); military organization model ("our movement is an army," said a Party document in the 1990s); strong nationalism based on a mythical version of French history; unconditional support to the police and armed forces (including French military operations abroad, at least before the 1960s); defence of death penalty; racism (disguised in the vocabulary of the "Nouvelle Droite": each culture should develop on its "natural" birthplace and soil, and not "invade" other cultures) coupled with all sorts of discriminatory measures in its program; sympathy for other authoritarian regimes (Assad's Syria, Putin's Russia, etc.).

One must also note the National Front, like old-style fascists, does not really care about ideological coherence. It has known numerous political U-turns and often defends contradictory positions. When the National Front decided to support Saddam Hussein in 1990, before the First Gulf War, Le Pen explained his new strategy in a reunion of the National Front leadership with these words: "*We have tried to support Israel, it did not work!*" The National Front denounces Arab/Muslim terrorism in Europe but meets the Hezbollah leader in Beirut, etc. It had a Reaganian economic program for many years, now it claims the French welfare state model should be defended, therefore the poor and modest Franco-French should be protected, France should get out of the Eurozone and re-establish the Franc, etc.

The permanent denunciation of "Europe" in terms very similar to the ones used by the social-chauvinist or even Radical Left and anti-globalization movement has helped the National Front to grow steadily (a factor denied by the Radical Left in 2005; the "no vote" to the European Constitutional Treaty could not have triumphed in France without the 6 million votes of the Far Right at that time).

It's obvious that the European Union appears as an ideal scapegoat to small farmers, small shopkeepers, small

businessmen and to many working class people who have lost their jobs or whose work has been “restructured” many times during the last 20 years. Not to mention all the measures supposedly “imposed by Brussels” as if they had not been conceived and approved by French Left and Right presidents, top ministers and counselors.

The nationalism of the National Front has also been quite useful, because its content was intelligently enlarged to become more appealing and less sectarian (both religiously and politically): before it was only linked to a very far historical past influenced by traditional Catholicism (Joan of Arch, French kings, famous aristocratic warriors, counter-revolutionary Breton “Chouannerie” and royalists); now it includes part of the heritage of French Revolution (the fact that it resisted as a “nation” against the invasion of foreign European monarchies), some Socialist (Jaurès) or Left leaders (Mendès-France, who was a target of the anti-Semitic Right in the 1950s), the French Resistance during World War 2 and even De Gaulle. This use of concepts, arguments or ideas coming from the Republican Left is a good example of “triangulation,” and it was launched by the French “Nouvelle Droite” in the early 1970s to whitewash neo-fascist and racist ideas. Limited to very small intellectual circles, this triangulation has become massive through the Internet and social networks; it has been quite effective to soften the reactionary image of the National Front created by its fascist origins, the numerous anti-Semitic “jokes” of Jean-Marie Le Pen, etc.

The fact of targeting Muslim (or so-called Muslim) foreigners or Franco-African people has been quite effective in gaining influence: it did not only attract the French who decided to leave Algeria in 1963 and their descendants (after all, it happened 50 years ago!), but also younger people who do not give a damn about Algeria, or former French colonial Empire, but are not ready to accept the idea of living in a country whose international influence is declining. They do not want to live in a multicultural society which authorizes women to wear hijabs (or niqabs) in the street. They do not want to have mosques built in their neighbourhood and to see young men wearing so-called traditional Muslim clothes wandering in the streets, etc. Left and Republican education and traditions have not prepared French people to accept such a variety of foreigners or nationals who practice Muslim religion and do not feel at all ashamed of their religious creeds or of their native countries.

This “cultural insecurity” (a concept used by some Left social-chauvinist intellectuals) has been successfully exploited by the National Front. Targeting Islam is quite efficient on three levels:

- **cultural**: the National Front defends European Christian civilization, its architectural patrimony, regional traditions, etc.;

- **political and geopolitical**: the National Front points at all countries where Islamist parties or movements threaten democratic rights. It recalls France has known several terrorist attacks financed by foreign “Muslim” powers (Iran) or perpetrated by French-Maghrebine citizens (Mohammed Merah). It points to the danger of a militant Islamism inside France, or even worse of an “Islamization” of this country, therefore it supports the banning of the hijab inside the schools and wants to extend it to the streets;

- **economic**: by targeting “Muslim” foreign workers, the National Front strongly suggests that if they were sent back to their native countries, unemployment will disappear.

The media presented Marine Le Pen’s personality in such a favorable way that they spread the illusion the National Front had become more liberal (i.e. “tolerant”) on social issues (women, gays, divorce, abortion, etc.). Many young National Front militants and sympathisers think Marine Le Pen and her young close collaborators at the head of the Front have different ideas from Jean-Marie Le Pen and its neo-fascist Old Guard. That’s partly wishful thinking but this process of self-persuasion is quite efficient, especially when new militants are labelled as fascists but never had any ties with fascist groups.

To come back to your question, social scientists like Nonna Mayer and Florent Gougou have an interesting hypothesis: they think white and blue-collar workers today have no more illusions in the traditional Left and Right parties which they (rightly) see as more or less identical. So they are not so much interested in concrete promises (which anyway the National Front can not concretize because, until last municipal elections in 2014, it did not even had one mayor who could make the difference on the local scale) than in a global vision of their situation and France’s perspectives. This reactionary national and global vision is offered, in a very dynamic way, by the National Front which defends an efficient national identity politics.

5. How do you analyze the sharp fall in the Far Left euro election vote – from 6% in 2009 to 1.6% in 2014, at a time of wide disillusion with the mainstream parties?

I have never taken very seriously the electoral results of the Far Left: people who vote for the Far Left can vote for the Right, the Left or even the National Front at other elections. It’s interesting to note Lutte ouvrière (LO) got in 2012 presidential election three times less votes (202 548) than 38 years before (595 247 in 1974), even it had temporary successes: in 1995 and 2002 (1,6 million votes). The other Trotskyist candidate (Olivier Besancenot) of the LCR got also a significant number of votes in 2002 (1,2 million) but what is left of

these 2.8 million LCR/LO voters of 2002? Absolutely nothing! This same year, the National Front got 4.8 million votes on the first round and 5.5 million votes on the second round, and this second event was much more important than the Far Left results. Whatever the elections (municipal, regional, national or European), Far Left voters never represented the “wide periphery” (i.e. sympathisers or ex-members) of the Trotskyist groups: this periphery represents maybe 50 to 100,000 people. Certainly not 2.8 million people!

The balance of the activity of the five LCR/LO Euro MPs elected in 1999 is close to nothing: they used the money to build their organisations, or to pay other electoral campaigns. They were never able to do anything in the European Parliament or, more important, outside it, with their mandate, apart from some symbolic visits they paid to strikers here and there (but for this you do not need to be an MP!). Krivine, the leader of the LCR, tells in his autobiography that they had the right to speak **90 seconds** to defend their ideas in the European Parliament! The European Parliament is in no way a generous revolutionary tribune where you can propagate Socialist ideas, as some national Parliaments in the 19th century, and you can’t print a speech of **ninety** seconds to “educate the masses “! It’s just a way to collect money and get a nice pension: being five years a European MP gives you a monthly pension of 2,500 euros which is quite good if you want to go on being a revolutionary militant afterwards! And to attract media’ attention... sometimes.

The Far Left is very weak in terms of militants (a few thousand), even if often the leaders of many local strikes appear to be members of Lutte ouvrière and of the NPA (Nouveau parti anticapitaliste). But they are “leaders” with a very little following among the working class, even if the Communist Party has partly lost its control of the CGT trade union. French trade unions are weaker and weaker (less than 8% of the wage earners, against 16 % in 1978, and 30 % in 1945). The fact that anybody who wants “to do the job” gets elected at a trade union position (and even at several positions at the same time, if he/she is ready to go for it), given the lack of voluntaries, does not mean this woman (or man) has a real political influence for his/her revolutionary ideas even after having worked for the same company for 20 years!

The Far Left propaganda during the elections is usually very vague. It does not mention socialism, the destruction of the state, use of armed violence, workers managing the factories, etc. It’s not really different from the Communist Party or the social-chauvinist Parti de Gauche propaganda. It says rich people are bad, capitalists should not receive subventions from the state, banks are greedy. Nothing really socialist...

And on the second round of the elections Far Left groups usually call to vote for the Left, or “against the Right” (what’s the difference?) or even for Chirac against Le Pen like in 2002. They do not make any difference on the electoral level.

Therefore it’s not surprising that “their” 2.8 million voters of 2002 have evaporated.

On the other side, the National Front, which started its electoral career exactly at the same time as the Trotskyists and got 190,921 votes in the 1974 presidential elections, has steadily grown to reach a much stronger power of nuisance: it reached its peak in 2012 (6,4 million), got significantly less in 2014 (4,7 million) but always received between 2 and 5 million votes for 40 years, except on very few occasions (it got only around 1 million votes 5 times over 23 elections, between 1984 and 2014).

Contrary to the Far Left, the National Front has been able to efficiently mobilize its voters to show two important symbolic things the Far Left has never been able to do:

– all the parties of the “system “, the so-called “UMPS⁴” are united against the National Front (therefore this party appears much more “persecuted” and “radical” than the Far Left has ever appeared to its own voters);

– all the parties refuse to change the electoral system and install a proportional vote. Their attitude means that present French democracy is a fraud. This opens many possibilities to all sorts of neo-fascist ideas from the destruction of trade unions to the defense of autonomous regions against the “totalitarian EU.” (By comparison, the Far Left never succeeded to convince its 2.8 million voters bourgeois democracy was a fake democracy...)

So when you ask me why 6.4 million people in 2012 or 4.7 million people in 2014 voted for the National Front, maybe a good part of these disillusioned people vote for a party who has a more efficient strategy than the Far Left and wages a cultural-political war, through the old and new media, which is much more efficient and convincing than ours....

To end on a more positive note I think we have to come back to some basic old ideas:

– elections should NOT be our main field of activity, contrary to the tradition of the French Far Left during the

⁴ UMP is the party of the Right, PS the Socialist Party. The acronym UMPS appears in the National Front propaganda as a symbol of a “soft totalitarianism” imposed by a pseudo-European “oligarchy,” America, the “Troika,” etc. This rhetoric is very similar to many confused ideas propagated by Radical Left and anarchist groups, as well as Indignados and Occupy movements in numerous countries.

last 40 years;

– we should always put forward internationalist or, better, anationalist principles and slogans instead of courting nationalist prejudices as the Far Left often does on national or international matters; we should wage an ideological/cultural fight against the Far Right and the New Right, but also against all those who, in the Left or the working class movement, propagate, consciously or unconsciously, their ideas;

–our class is not the “99% “of humanity but the working class, which means a social revolution will imply some drastic choices and will not equally satisfy the immediate needs of everybody on this planet, from the former capitalist or executive to the former poorest farmer;

–we will never “transform the world” if we do not destroy the state... No nice workers’ cooperative, no friendly fair trade association, no radical liberated zone, will ever free us from the rule of capitalism.

21/6/2014

The National Front and its influence among French workers

I would like to make an introductory remark about the title of today's debate. Then I'll describe how does the National Front attracts and sometimes even recruit workers, I will deal with some misconceptions about this Far Right party and finally discuss two conceptions of antifascism.

The title of today's debate

Today's debate is labeled "Is the Far Right winning over Europe's workers?" This question is full of traps and I will mention only three of them.

First trap: what is the Far Right? Do we mean the fascist/neo-fascist Right, or all the radical nationalist currents in Europe, usually labelled today as "national-populists"? In other words, do we target the British UKIP or neo-Nazi Golden Dawn? The xenophobic Dutch PVV of Geert Wilders or Italian fascist groups like Casa Pound?

Second trap: what do we exactly mean by workers? I won't elaborate on this subject but it's obvious that clear-cut class definitions are essential to define a radical antifascist policy. Therefore it should not surprise us ~~that~~ antifascism leads to unproductive alliances if they rest on vague concepts like "the people," progressists, Republicans, democrats, etc.

Third trap, implicit in today's debate formulation: how can we measure the influence of this "Far Right" over workers, outside electoral results which are always biased?

I'm active in a Parisian working class district hosting an important foreign population. Our network tries to help undocumented foreign workers to obtain their papers through legal actions and mobilizations in the schools, or to get them out of detention centers when they are arrested. So, in this district, I almost never come across French Far Right workers who openly express racist or fascist views. (I must admit though I often meet Chinese workers who express xenophobic ideas against Arabs or Africans, and vice versa, but as they are not allowed to vote and are not politically organized as a reactionary pressure group, it does not really concern today's discussion.) My main sources of information about the National Front are either articles or books written by journalists, or social scientists, who have been temporarily active inside the National Front, either openly or under a fake identity. So from their experience, I can formulate some hypotheses about who are these workers active in the National Front, or who votes for this Far Right party, but obviously, I will not be able to give you a fully-argued answer to the question at the center of this debate.

The National Front and French working class

Until now, the National Front has never succeeded to form its own party or permanent trade union structures among the working class or even among other classes like the traditional petty-bourgeoisie (shopkeepers, craftsmen, etc.). In the 1990s, it had a policemen's trade union for a few years (1995-1998) but it was banned. The National Front tried to build trade unions in public transports in Paris and Lyon (1996), in prisons (1996-1998) among post office workers, tenants, teachers and small bosses, but all these projects failed. So its members were obliged to enter the most reactionary – scab, right Christian or anti-Communist – trade unions with little success. Apparently, during the last ten years, they recruited some militants inside the CGT, former Communist Party trade union. This evolution was revealed when these militants announced their candidacy for last municipal elections.

There are presently only a few towns in France where the National Front has succeeded to become locally rooted in working-class districts. At last municipal elections in March 2014, it won 1,500 municipal councilors and 14 mayors but I have no idea if they were all in working-class towns so I will take only the example of Vitrolles and Hénin-Beaumont today.

Until now, National Front militants have experienced difficulties to appear publicly as such. They encounter all sorts of problems, inside their own families, at work, in their building, in their neighbourhood, as soon as they are spotted as National Front supporters. Some say they lost their jobs, others tell that the atmosphere at work became so unpleasant they were obliged to resign or were denied a promotion, a pay raise, etc. Others tell their car tires or windows were damaged, they were physically threatened, insulted, their house or car was covered with graffiti, etc. Whether these stories are partially true does not matter very much; these rumours or real strong reactions against the National Front have impeded its militants to openly act for their party until a recent period. Women, for example, often use their maiden's name not to be recognized when they represent the National Front in municipal elections; militants do not distribute leaflets and put up posters in the district where they live, but in a distant neighbourhood, etc. That maybe one of the few positive consequences of the Republican antifascist propaganda against the National Front.

Actually, the only towns where it was and is a bit easier for the National Front are those where the Reformist Left, generally the Socialist Party accumulated many flaws:

- the municipal leading team was totally discredited by its corruption: free official cars with personal driver, free restaurants, expensive travels paid by the taxpayers, hiring of relatives and friends in the local administration, fictitious jobs, an excessive number of state-financed temporary jobs, no tendering for public sector contracts;
- Socialist Party mayors were heavily condemned or, worse, put in jail;
- the Socialist Party was divided into several fractions fiercely fighting against each other, up to the point of falsifying internal elections results; the Socialist Party used more and more advertisement agencies to promote its politics instead of mobilizing its militants,
- the influence of the Communist Party was weak, dramatically declining, especially among migrant workers and their children,
- the Left mayor and municipal councilors were cut off from their working class electorate. They started, like in Vitrolles, courting the bosses and promoting pharaonic projects for their constituencies (in this case a stadium),
- unemployment raised to a very high percentage,
- local trade unions and associations were very weak, in crisis, etc.

These constituencies have been deliberately targeted by the National Front for the weaknesses of the Left and of the workers movement, but also the destruction of all social ties (for example, in Northern France, the Catholic church and mine bosses organized and controlled all the aspects of miners' daily life: company shops, company housing, company health system, holiday camps, sports teams, etc. So when the mines disappeared, it gave a death blow to all social links).

To illustrate the National Front's policy, I will take two very different examples: Vitrolles in the south of France and Hénin-Beaumont in the north.

– Vitrolles

Vitrolles was an essential element in the struggle between the general secretary of the National Front (Bruno Mégret) and his president Jean-Marie Le Pen. Although he was supported by young nationalist-revolutionaries (i.e. fascists) at that time, Bruno Mégret wanted in the 1990s to make electoral alliances with the Right in order to

become later the hegemonic force in this alliance. Jean-Marie Le Pen had a very different strategy: he wanted to provoke a serious institutional crisis during which he thought he could appear as the charismatic Saviour of France.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Vitrolles rapidly grew out from a small village into a rather chaotic urban agglomeration of 36,000 inhabitants. It attracted workers who were sacked in the North of France and offered a new job in the nearby steel industry of L'Etang de Berre; workers who had left Marseilles to buy a house with a credit, etc. It had no old Communist Party or Socialist Party tradition even if a Socialist (Jean-Jacques Anglade) was Vitrolles mayor during 14 years (1983-1997). In this region, there has always been a strong influence of the “*pieds noirs*” – the million French people who left Algeria after 150 years of colonization and came to live in France, mainly in the South. Politically, this region was characterized by a tight cooperation between the Center, the Right and the Far Right, a rather unusual situation at that time. This very special political climate benefitted to the National Front, transforming it into a “respectable” force as testified by the electoral agreements signed in 1986 and 1988 between the Front national, UDF and RPR.

There was also a growing difference and even a conflict between two categories of workers:

- the upper working class members living in the new districts regrouping new small houses; these categories feared to loose their job, fall down the social ladder and become unable to pay their real estate credit;
- the workers living in the older districts, in public housing flats with a strong proportion of foreign workers, unemployed, monoparental families but also militant associations which tried to preserve the unity between the inhabitants, whatever were their origins.

The aim of the National Front in Vitrolles was to deepen the differences between these two groups of the working class, the second group being denounced as “parasites,” “Social Security cheaters,” “lazy people not willing to work and living on benefits”; and the first group being hailed as hard working Frenchmen and women.

Mégret’s personal aim was to use the material means of the municipality (staff, cars, and phones, print shop) to take the leadership in the National Front.

The Socialist Party’s mayor (Jean-Luc Anglade) had ruined the local finances but Mégret and his wife Catherine did not do better when they were elected and run the town between 1997 and 2002. Apart from their financial incompetence, they also closed several active cultural centers considered as too leftist; they stopped supporting financially many local associations; they renamed streets and avenues; they opened small museums to glorify French colonialism; they promoted Provençal traditions; they generalized video surveillance (a program with was launched by the Socialist mayor) and doubled the number of municipal policemen. They sacked 80 municipal employees and waged a cultural war inside local public libraries; they stopped subscriptions to Left or liberal publications, and bought hundreds of books published by Far Right publishers, refusing even to buy children’s books when the author had a foreign name, etc. Their brutal management raised a strong opposition inside a minority of the local population (the majority was afraid), often from people who were not active in any party before and who took many risks, confronting during five years the fascist thugs hired by the mayor Catherine Mégret and her husband, Bruno Mégret. But, in 2002, the nightmare ended (as well in three other cities managed by the National Front), the two Mégrets lost the municipal elections and the Left won Vitrolles back.

– Hénin-Beaumont

More or less at the same time, a similar attempt to win a municipality with a strong local support was organized in Hénin-Beaumont, in the north of France. Since the 1970s, the main industries (mines, textile, and steel) have progressively disappeared in this region. Today, 60% of the local population are poor non-tax payers; 23 % receive the RSA (analogous to the Australian Newstart Allowance), that is 395 pounds per month for one person and 592 pounds for an unemployed couple.

In Hénin-Beaumont, this attempt to win a municipality was led in a much softer way by a sales representative (Steve Briois⁵); he did not try to wage a too violent ideological battle as his friend Mégret did, at least that it was not his main activity. He started inquiring about how the mayor managed local finances. And when his inquiry, in 2002, and his public denunciation led to a trial, he went to court every day, packing the courtroom with National Front militants, and commenting the event on his daily blog. He also organized several “happenings” on the local market; for example, once he collected oranges⁶ for the Socialist mayor condemned to three years in jail.

⁵ As he states himself: “*To be active in politics is to sell an ideal. (...) Politics is marketing; it’s not my fault if society is made like that. The difference between a political activity and a commercial activity is that what we sell is free. The only thing I ask people is to get out of their house on Sunday morning and vote.*”

⁶ In French, as a joke, we say “I will bring you oranges “when somebody risks a jail sentence.

In 2003, Steve Briois and the National Front started to focus on local strikes and factory closures. He tried to come at the gates of these companies and even to enter inside but was not well received by workers and CGT trade unionists.

Nevertheless, he gave locally a more “social image” to the National Front, and that was the most important element for him and his party.

Steve Briois became a municipal counselor in 1995, regional counselor in 1998, European deputy in 2014 and mayor of Hénin-Beaumont in March 2014. In this long struggle, he was strongly supported during the last five years by Marine Le Pen (who is always followed by dozens of journalists, a significant asset for any candidate...). Briois’s methods were very different from Bruno Mégret and he did not use so many fascist thugs of the skinhead type, or at least he taught them how to have a more respectable dress code and try to stay “cool” in front of their political adversaries; he recruited among former local Socialist, Communist or Right militants, thanks to his long and patient work as a municipal counselor.

The various campaigns he led in this old working-class town⁷ enabled him and Marine Le Pen to appear as much more “moderate” than Mégret and his team in Vitrolles in the 1990s. As Briois had lived in this town since he was 13 years old, and started to be a radical-right activist when he was 16 years old, he was well known by everybody. More and more people started appearing openly as supporters and voters of the National Front. It has become easier for them as Marine Le Pen started changing the public image of her party and convincing the public, with the help of the media, that the National Front was caring about workers not only about bosses’ interests. Jean-Marie Le Pen had made once a similar move in 2002⁸ but at that time the National Front’s economic program was openly in favour of private initiative and diminution of state intervention.

Feverish social demagogy

In the recent years, this economic program has not changed much, but the official rhetoric of Briois and Marine Le Pen has tried to appear more compatible with workers’ needs: Briois demagogically said he was proud of Jaurès (a nineteenth-century Socialist leader), Pierre Mauroy (a Socialist Prime minister coming from a working-class background), and several local Socialist Party mayors and famous Second World War resistants. Supported by Marine Le Pen, he pretended the National Front:

- was in favor of the 35-hour working week and wanted to keep the retirement age at 60 years,
- wanted to “tax the rich,”
- demanded the creation of a sliding scale of wages,
- defended the idea of nationalizing the banks if necessary and obliging the companies to give back public subsidies, if they relocated their actives (in the North of France, several companies took the money of the state and disappeared),
- denounced the “evils of finance capital”;
- and demanded that the prices of basic products should be controlled by the state.

A program which could be defended by the Communist Party, the social-chauvinist Parti de Gauche and even the Trotskyists!

But we must never forget that the National Front said for many years, like the bosses union and all mainstream economists, that companies paid too much labor-related contributions and taxes, trade unions had too much power and strikes should be “regulated.”

⁷ Actually, Hénin-Beaumont is a product of the fusion between two “communes”: Hénin-Liétard, a traditional working-class town, and a village called Beaumont surrounded by fields and farms. Few journalists noticed National Front votes were much higher in the rural area and village of Beaumont than in the working-class town of Hénin-Liétard. In such rural areas, there is no railway station or main road nearby, no police station, no post-office, no shop or pub. Very few migrants live in these areas but the inhabitants are brainwashed by all the sensationalist images propagated by the various television channels about incidents, riots or crimes involving so-called “Muslims” or “Arabs” in France. People are obliged to have a car (and sometimes two in the same family) which is a costly investment given the price of gasoline. They think they have no future, are abandoned by the state, a feeling exploited by the National Front at every election. One must also add very few journalists noticed that all the towns surrounding Hénin-Beaumont were still in the hands of the Socialist or Communist Parties, and had Socialist Party or Communist Party mayors or MPs. So Hénin-Beaumont is still an exception, even if it a dangerous one.

⁸ He always used to say “*I’m socially right wing, economically left wing, and nationally French,*” but after he defeated Jospin in the first round of 2002 Presidential election, he went one step further and declared: “*Don’t be afraid to dream (...), you miners, metalworkers, male and female workers of all the industries ruined by Maastricht euro-globalism.*”

So we shall see in the future if the National Front will go farther in this demagogic “social” direction or maintain a traditional Bonapartist attitude between the opposing interests of the social classes it pretends to represent.

– Restoring social links

Obviously, in working-class districts, the National Front regularly distributes leaflets against “insecurity” (bank robberies, burglaries, night incidents involving young migrants, Franco-Arab or Franco-African youth, suburban riots, etc.), Islam and migration. And if this general propaganda has some echo among workers, it’s not enough to really make a difference on the local level.

When the National Front has devoted municipal councilors like in Hénin-Beaumont, they do pretty much the same as what the Communist and Socialist parties did in the past: they visit people systematically at their homes, listen patiently to their problems, carefully note their grievances, try to exert pressures on social services⁹ so that people get a new flat, a domestic help at home for an elderly person, a financial help of some sort so that can send their children to a holiday camp or pay part of their debts, etc. The National Front municipal councilors create a network of “district correspondents” who inform them of all the little problems (from a traffic light which does not work to a fight in the street involving “Muslims”). Obviously, these “correspondents” can also spy on all political opponents. The National Front militants organize paying banquets for the 14th of July (a national day). They sell pins, lighters, scarves representing Marine Le Pen, etc.

When it has the financial means, the National Front opens local headquarters which are used both for political aims and as a center of local life where anybody can come and chat, drink a coffee, help to fold leaflets, etc. Their headquarters become a very lively center of the local social life, recreating links which had disappeared, playing the same role as the “People’s houses” or “Bourses du travail” run by the Socialist or Communist parties or trade unions. The National Front organizes cocktails (“apéritifs” where you do not need to dress up just to get “happy”) anniversaries, etc. And obviously, this “nice” side of the National Front is presented to, and promoted by, the media.

Steve Briois also tours the different National Front federations to promote the “Hénin-Beaumont” model in other regions.

– The National Front xenophobic program has not disappeared

The difference with what the Left used to do is that the National Front puts forward xenophobic but unfortunately appealing solutions to people who are unemployed or fear to lose their job. It proposes:

- to deport all undocumented workers,
- to restrict foreign workers’ social rights (especially if they are unemployed, delinquents, parents of delinquents, “bad parents,” etc.),
- to suppress the French nationality of the naturalized foreigners who have committed crimes,
- to extend to the private sector the French state policy (no foreigner can be employed with the status of a public employee): what was called before “national preference” has been now renamed “national priority” by Marine Le Pen but the content is the same.

Obviously, National Front mayors and municipal councilors can’t apply all these measures today, because they are illegal...

So they have successively used two tactics:

- they first tried, like in Vitrolles in 1997-2002, to implement these discriminatory measures by force and were therefore condemned by the courts to pay heavy fines which contributed to the town’s bankruptcy, so it was a bad move on the long term. Mégret made this choice in Vitrolles, not because he thought he could really win, but to show to the public opinion that “the UMPS establishment” was not defending the interests of French people;
- today, under the leadership of the “moderate” Marine Le Pen, the National Front militants present these measures as a concrete solution to unemployment when they will come to power and be able to change the laws.

In Hénin-Beaumont, in the north of France, like Mégret did in the South, and probably other mayors today, the National Front tries also to reactivate local traditions which have disappeared, like a parade of flowered floats (“corso”) or a festival around medieval themes; for years, Briois participates to every ball and dances with old ladies; he memorizes all the names he can stock in his memory and never forgets to shake hands with his voters or kiss them on the cheeks every time he meets them.

Caring about local working-class or popular traditions is an excellent way for the National Front to get votes and also to reinforce its nationalist agenda. I have not seen Ken Loach’s last film *Jimmy Hall* but from what I have read, these techniques of “bonding” with the local population have apparently a long history.

⁹ “Thanks to me, social workers have less work. We are very close to the people, like before, when it was still the party of Jaurès,” said Briois.

The National Front is inspired by the Communist Party ideology in the '50s, '60s, and '70s

To sum up, the National Front is copying, in some working-class regions, the politics and organization of the Stalinist party in the 1950s: a strong nationalism, an attachment to local traditions, a will to defend local jobs, a certain critique of “bad bosses” (i.e. foreign bosses, multinationals or Stock Exchange speculators). Officially, the National Front is no more a racist party but its militants have difficulties to control their xenophobic and especially their anti-Islam and anti-Roma prejudices. But their ideas are not very far from what Georges Marchais, the French Communist Party leader, wrote in 1981: *“One should stop legal and illegal migration, the housing crisis is worsening, there is a cruel lack of social housing, French families can't have access to these flats, and the social benefits distributed to pauperized migrant families are killing the communes budget.”*

What's new with Marine Le Pen? The National Front has recently introduced a small dose of “tolerance” in the traditionally conservative social ideology of the Far Right: a “tolerance” towards divorce (Marine Le Pen has divorced twice and is not married with her present companion), abortion (she refuses to suppress the law which legalized it) and homosexuality (she has close collaborators who are gay; she was interviewed in a gay magazine, etc.).

– A right-wing drift which started in the 1970s in Europe

Nevertheless, this modernization of the Far Right is not actually a purely French phenomenon, it happened in other countries under various forms and it is influenced by the appearance of new nationalist-populist parties.

Obviously, in the Netherlands, Denmark, and Sweden, where there has never been any mass Communist party, and where social democracy always had a class-collaborationist policy with the bosses and the state, it does not take the same form as in Italy, Spain or Portugal, which have had mass Stalinist Parties and even militant Socialist Parties, at least at one point of their history.

But in all Europe, there are new Far Right parties who often do not come directly from a fascist tradition: the Vlaams Belang in Belgium, PVV in the Netherlands, Freedom Party (FPO) in Austria, UDC in Switzerland, Progress Party in Norway, People's Party in Denmark, even if some of their leaders may have a purely fascist past. And this development is due to the fact that European societies have known massive changes in the internal composition of the working class, in the nature of the so-called workers movement and the spatial and social organization of working-class districts.

The working-class vote for the Left has been declining in all Europe since the end of the 1970s. In France, in the middle of 1980s, it was reinforced by a change in the relation of forces between the working-class votes for the Right and for the Far Right. And this evolution was not limited to France. The profile of conservative workers, labelled “working-class Tories” has been analysed, in the early 1970s, in Britain: these workers loved their company, admired their boss, and recognized the legitimacy of the “elite” and its competence. I suppose these right-wing workers have not disappeared with the development of the crisis.

The structural transformations of capitalism and world economy have accelerated the transformation of the working class; the European Far Right has therefore focused its attention on the losers of the globalization process: the unqualified workers, and obviously the poor farmers and shopkeepers, self-employed, precarious workers of all kinds. Welfare chauvinism has been growing and it targets migrants, which are supposed to be a threat for wages and social benefits and a threat to national identity. The new generations of workers who, since the middle of the 1970s, have known mass unemployment and precarization of their living and working conditions, and have watched the decline of the trade unions, the final transformation of social democracy into a simple appendix of the bourgeois state, and the collapse of the Stalinist parties, are much more sceptical about the Left than their parents and grandparents. They want to “give a chance” to the national-populist parties or the “renovated” Far Right parties like the National Front because their values are much more conservative than the generations of workers born before the Second World War or until the early '60s.

So, for all these reasons and many others, we have still a long and hard ideological and political battle to wage.

Some clichés and preconceived ideas about the National Front

* **Is the National Front against the “system”? Is it “neither a leftwing nor a rightwing” party?**

Actually, during most of its history, the National Front’s main leader has had discreet contacts and negotiations with most leaders of the Right from Chirac to Valéry Giscard d’Estaing (both presidents of the Republic), to Charles Pasqua, minister of Interior. Jean-Marie Le Pen has often negotiated on a national, or on a local level, with the Right. It has recruited old-style right-wing politicians often asking them to pay their entry inside the National Front. During several years, the National Front has been financed by the Moon sect, helped by hundreds of its militants, etc. So the National Front can in no way be considered as an “anti-system” party, even if, like the French fascists of the 1930s, it pretends to be “neither Right nor Left.” Not to mention the fact that this party strongly depends on French state generous financing system for all the elections and on the personal wealth of its leader. Jean-Marie Le Pen has organized all sorts of dubious speculative maneuvers with the National Front members’ money and, for this purpose, he created a personal company¹⁰ (COTELEC). He also hijacked the inheritance of an ageing, alcoholic, mythomaniac fascist capitalist (Hubert Lambert). So it’s obvious that Jean-Marie Le Pen, his (first and second) wives and daughters belong to the bourgeoisie, given their social status, properties, material privileges inside their own party, etc.

* **Is the National Front more anti-Muslim than anti-Jewish?**

Obviously, according to the periods and the varying influence of fascists active inside the National Front, at the local level, but also in its leadership, this has varied. Since 2011, when Marine Le Pen became the President of the National Front, official, public, anti-Semitism has publicly diminished. Marine Le Pen has tried several times to pay an official visit to Israel; she contacted leaders of the American Jewish community, etc. But when one reads testimonies about local militants and cadres and what they say in internal meetings, it does not seem anti-Semitism has disappeared from the National Front. It’s just forbidden to publicly express anti-Jewish feelings on Facebook, on local National Front websites, in public meetings or press conferences, etc.

* According to Wikipedia in English “*the National Front was a neofascist party which did not really want to take power through elections and alliances with the republican Right. The new National Front has abandoned any hope to seize power by force and has now become a “center-right” party*” This analysis is a bit too rapid!

The National Front’s program and strategy have known many twists and turns. Obviously, in the short term, if any mass fascist party appears in France it will most certainly come from a fraction of the present National Front. For the moment, Marine Le Pen is trying to operate the same kind of political mutation Fini did when he transformed the Italian neofascist MSI into Aleanza Nazionale.

Even if many fascist groups criticize the National Front for being too moderate, “Zionist” or “pro-American,” they still have very good friends and allies inside the National Front, as was shown, for example, during the mass demonstrations organized in 2013 against the gay marriage.

* **Is the National Front the “first working class party” in France?** It does not control any trade union, or any fraction in any trade union, even if it has trade-unionists in its ranks. It does not organize a significant, militant, youth organization. It does not play any role in the strikes or struggles for better living standards in working class suburbs. It’s not able for the moment to control whole sections of the territory as French social-democracy and later Communist party did. So we should obviously be preoccupied by its growing electoral and ideological influence (for example, its electoral results encouraged the “Republican” Right to adopt part of its agenda on migration, “insecurity” and Islam) but we should not panic or become paralyzed by the National Front.

¹⁰ Marine Le Pen followed her father’s steps by creating “Jeanne,” a structure designed to collect money aside from the party. Twenty of her closest collaborators and friends are now expecting a trial for their financial manipulations and illegal use of the European Union’s electoral funds.

* **Is the National Front constantly progressing since its foundation in 1972?** If we look both at its electoral results and its number of membership cards the picture is more complex. In 1972, it had around 2,000 sympathizers, but ten years later (1982 and 1983) less than 250. Its membership started to rise in 1984, thanks to the state television channel which invited Jean-Marie Le Pen incited by Mitterrand who gave a little push to Le Pen in the name of democracy. It reached 20,000 card holders in 1989 and 42,000 in 1998 just before the split between Mégret and Le Pen. Then it went down (12,800 in 2000) and started to go up again only ten years later, in 2010 (20,000); since then, the progression has been impressive and permanent: 46,868 (according to other sources 34,000) members in 2011 and 74,000 in 2013.

Now, if we consider its electoral results, they do not coincide exactly with its ups and downs in terms of (supposed) membership. This is linked to the special relationship between the voters, the party and its leader (Jean-Marie Le Pen, and now Marine Le Pen). Therefore the National Front always got better results at presidential election campaigns which correspond more to its authoritarian nature, regrouped around a beloved Leader, who has always put forward his name, promoting his face (even his eye-patch during some years) and his body on all electoral posters, often not even mentioning his party's name. And his daughter follows exactly the same path, promoting herself much more than her party. This attitude is both a product of Le Pen's neofascist values and of French presidential system, itself influenced by modern marketization techniques which sell politicians to voters the same way they sell cars to consumers.

* **Is the National Front a racist party like the Nazi party?**

Most voters, especially in working-class areas, pretend not to be racist. They say they have Arab or African friends (which is sometimes true) but explicitly express their hate against travellers, Roma, and Romanians. They explain their vote for the National Front as a simple "protest vote" (a convenient explanation propagated by the media); they think Marine Le Pen is very different from her racist and anti-Semitic father, or they sometimes use a "democratic argument": "After all, they deserve also to have their chance and prove what they are able to do."

The cadres of the National Front have an absurd defence system: "*We are neither racists nor anti-Semites. But it's normal to discriminate. Let's take a very simple example: a man falls in love with a woman, he discriminates the other women. The same in a restaurant, when you choose a dish, you discriminate the dishes you do not order.*" And nobody laughs when a cadre holds such stupid "reasonings" in a National Front meeting.

Le Pen, as bizarre as it may sound, has never been a 100% racist in the Nazi sense, a supporter of a totally "white" France, even if he recently made a Nazi "joke" about how the Ebola virus could solve Africa's problems; he has always made racist statements¹¹ to get the attention of the press, to keep his fascist supporters inside the Front and to embarrass the members of his party who wanted to make alliances with the "respectable" Right. He is one of those Far-Right politicians who have participated in French colonial wars and learned to "appreciate" (in a very paternalistic-racist way obviously) the Arab, Asian and African auxiliaries of French Army. The National Front always tried to present itself as the best friend of the *harkis*¹², especially before every election, even if the majority of them vote more for the Right than for the Far Right.

Le Pen has always defended an "assimilationist" line, not the deportation or imprisonment of every person who is not Franco-French; in other words, Le Pen likes "good" migrants who are working hard and great patriots, but he does not want "too much" of them on the French soil.

On this point, he has repeatedly fought against those who wanted no Franco-Arabs or Franco-Africans in the National Front, especially in the leadership or as National Front candidates. This may explain why Le Pen can be seen by some Franco-Maghrebian or West Indian workers, or by some migrants as not so racist... And his friendship with Franco-African stand-up comedian Dieudonné has certainly helped him to soften his image as a racist.

Everybody knows that Sarkozy, when he was the minister of Interior, went in 2005 to visit La Courneuve, where a young boy was killed by a stray gunshot. This day, he declared this district would be "cleaned out with a Kärcher" – meaning all criminals should be removed. Later, he used the word "scumbags" to qualify those who booed him in Argenteuil, another Parisian suburb. But few people know that Jean-Marie Le Pen gave a very short press conference (30 minutes – Le Pen is brave but not foolhardy) in Argenteuil, in 2007, and declared: "*If some people want to karcherize you to exclude you, we want to help you to get out of these suburban ghettos where French politicians have trapped you to qualify you afterwards as scumbags.*" "*You are neither our "potes*

¹¹ "Blacks have more talent for dancing or sports than Whites."

¹² This word designates soldiers who voluntarily (or not) helped French Army in Algeria, repatriated French Muslims and their descendants.

[pals]¹³” nor Blacks nor Beurs [Arabs], you are French citizens, the legitimate children of France, you are part of the Republic, you have the same rights as all of us.” This declaration followed his 2006 speech at Valmy directed to the “French people of foreign origin.”

Therefore, Alain Soral, at that time member of the Central Committee of the National Front, created in 2007 an association, “Egalité et Réconciliation,” in order to convince Franco-Maghrebian people that “national preference” policy was not directed against them. A difficult task obviously but he was (and is) not totally unsuccessful. He obviously had in mind recruiting among some Franco-Maghrebians, so that the National Front would not be labelled anymore as racist.

This obviously seems incredible to believe, given Le Pen’s repeated declarations about racial inequality, but we must admit his double language works sometimes, including with people who should normally consider him as a racist. So, if the National Front is not a Nazi party, it’s certainly not a “center-right” party either, like Wikipedia pretends!

*** Is the National Front gaining influence among Franco-Africans, Franco-Asians, and Franco-Maghrebians in France?**

To start with, foreigners who get work and stay permits become sometimes a bit xenophobic or behave like Uncle Toms, spreading French nationalism as soon as they get their papers. “Yes there are too many foreigners in France” (generally that’s what Algerians would say about Malians, Chinese about Moroccans, Turks about Senegalese, etc.). French nationalism is quite strong in the media, and even more when the Right is in power.

Among the French descendants of Maghrebian, African, Chinese or Turkish parents, and among migrants who have a work and stay permit, their political views depend very much on their level of social integration. You can find Chinese (or Franco-Chinese) or Algerian (or Franco-Algerians) small businessmen or small executives who have a right-wing, Reaganian attitude and say horrible things about “foreigners “... i.e. their own parents!!! Some of these people could vote for the National Front, but I’m not sure it’s a massive phenomenon.

You also have those who are at the bottom of the social ladder. They are torn between:

– their will to be “integrated “in French society at all costs (like their friends and neighbours of the same origin who have succeeded to have a good job, move to a better district, etc.)

– and the (hard or soft) racist reactions they often get from the Franco-French or the hidden institutional racism which impregnates French society.

For those who are at the bottom of the social scale, religion is obviously an efficient way to shape a stronger identity, generally a Muslim identity. I doubt this kind of people can be attracted by the National Front because this party, for the moment, prefers to court Jewish religious reactionaries than Muslim ones. But it can change, and in this case the National Front would depart even more from the classic fascist model of the 1930s...

In a society where multiculturalism is officially praised, it’s probably easier to define oneself first by one’s national origin, than in a national-republican society like France. Therefore it’s more the poorest migrants or descendants of migrants who give priority to their religious and/or ethnic origins.

The “Bac + 5” (those who have studied several years after high school) know that, to succeed in French society, they must be proud to be French and put aside their religious/ethnic origins. Because, for the moment, there is no real room for multiculturalism in the French elites...

There is also another solution, at least for those who have enough money or a good business project financed by their family: becoming a successful businessman; in this case, their social success is not built on their diplomas, on the acceptance of the Franco-French hierarchy inside the companies or the state. They can free themselves of all national-republican ideas and be proud of their origins. This model is not widespread but it will grow.

So about the National Front influence among Franco-Africans and Franco-Asians, if this xenophobic party is really able to change and to do what it pretends, it may attract not only Franco-French but also people of other origins. But, in the long term, this would lead to a split or a massive purge inside the National Front. I’m not sure Marine Le Pen is able to do it because her father controls all the money¹⁴. It’s not only a psychological problem but also a financial one. Such an open policy would need a split. And will the young ex-fascists who are

¹³ “*Touche pas à mon pote* “(Don’t touch my pal) was a slogan of the antiracist movement SOS Racisme sponsored and manipulated by the Left government and Socialist Party in 1984 and afterwards.

¹⁴ *She created a second structure, called Jeanne, to become financially independent from her father and in order to collect money on her own, but Jeanne and twenty of Marine Le Pen’s close friends and collaborators are presently (May 2017) investigated by French judges. So we shall see if she succeeds to continue her financial maneuvers without being caught.*

today her close collaborators appreciate such “openness” towards a massive arrival of Franco-Arabs or Franco-Africans inside the party?

Not to mention the fact the Rassemblement Bleu Marine (an ad hoc organization built outside the National Front around Marine Le Pen) includes groups which are really anti-Muslim. I’m sure they would not like to see too much “Arabs” in their meetings...

* **Has the National Front become “gay-friendly “like the Dutch far-right populist Pim Fortuyn and Geert Wilders?** Several close collaborators of Marine Le Pen are gay and even more important Steve Briois, the exemplary National Front mayor of Hénin-Beaumont, is apparently gay, even if he did not do his “coming out” yet. Marine Le Pen has supported all his political battles and visited dozens of times his town during the last five years (she tried to be elected several times in this region). That may explain why she did not participate in the big demonstrations against gay marriage. Let’s recall Jean-Marie Le Pen considers homosexuality as a “devious attitude”...

Marine Le Pen uses the fears of Islam propagated in the gay community to attack all the believers of this religion in an insidious way. Islamic fundamentalism appears as a danger to the homosexuals and lesbians and when Marine Le Pen declared “it’s not easy to be homosexual in certain districts,” she was clearly targeting working class suburbs which include a high proportion of people coming from the Maghreb and who are supposedly “Muslim.”

* **Why and when does Marine Le Pen use “Left” values?** She always does it to attack Islam and Muslims: the National Front “defends” women to denounce the way they are treated in the Arabic Gulf; she “defends” Jews to explain anti-Semitism is popular among Arabs and Muslims living in France and she “defends” gays to attack Islam for its homophobia.

* **Is the National Front a party which ignores the youth, including young workers?** No. Contrary to the Far Right policy until the end of 1990s, the new National Front young leaders have tried to express more tolerant views towards rap and (what they call) “musiques métissées” (meaning racially mixed musics). French youth today do not trust Left and Right politicians, they are often not interested in political programs on television or discussing politics among themselves. By presenting many young candidates at local elections in March 2014, Marine Le Pen has tried and apparently succeeded to attract part of the youth, including the working class youth, partly because the other Parties (including the Left and Far Left) mostly present candidates who are over 40 years old. Thus she sent a message: the National Front is able to change things now. Marion Maréchal Le Pen, 22 years old, is today the youngest MP of French Parliament.